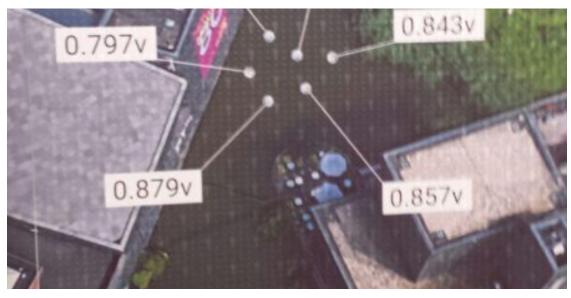☰

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EXODUS

NONPOLITICS   BARBARIANS, CYBERPOLITICS, EMPIRE, EXODUS, NEGRI/HARDT, TIQQUN

In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam argued that in the wake of so-called new economy's emergence civic participation and person-to-person interactions had undergone a precipitous decline, contributing to a loss of 'social capital' that in turned frayed the fabric of American democracy. This transformation stretched from the heights of political organizing – such as the decline in voter participation, for instance – to various civil society organizations and platforms for civic associations. Declining memberships in various clubs and fraternal organizations, the evaporation of a volunteer-based ethic, the break-up of labor unions, and the fragmenting of the communitarian infrastructure all signaled a transition towards what Putnam deemed a process individualization – or what we would more commonly refer to as *atomization* (see here and here) – that derives from the increased integration of technology into our everyday lives.

Critics of Putnam's work have noted that this decline isn't so much as the elimination of interactive behavior and platforms for it outright; while indeed the phenomenon that is described in *Bowling Alone* is palpable, it signals a fundamental shift away from a particular social infrastructure that congealed in the wake of industrialization in the United States, reaching its height in the postwar regime of High (or Late) Fordism. Atomization is co-existent with the arrival of new forms of social life and ways of being – the ubiquity of the *social network*, for example, fills the void left by the closed doors of Elks Club. Yet the primary factor of Putnam's argument remains: the decline of the community *ideal*, as something that is at once local and integral, while also being plugged into the gears of mass democracy. The social network can be local, but it is borderless, with tendrils reaching out across time and space. It can (as will be touched on momentarily) connection with political operations, but the manner in which it does so is by no means obvious.

Michael Negri/Hardt and Antonio Negri took up Putnam's argument in their book *Multitude*, but discarded the sad nostalgia that

suffused his work. "One should do away with this nostalgia…" Instead, we should celebrate the dissolution of the traditional body, and look towards the new synthetic Thing that has emerged: the monstrous New Flesh of the multitude, a strange fabric composed of the "social catastrophes of postmodernity, similar in their minds to the horrible results of genetic engineering gone wrong or the terrifying consequences of industrial, nuclear, or ecological disasters" (yes please!!).

Hardt and Negri's words here recall the best passages of their previous book, *Empire*. There they take up Nietzsche's prophetic vision of future "barbarians" who would arrive "only after tremendous socialist crises", and re-route to a peculiar sort of cyberpunk transhumanism that emphasizes the already-occurring mutation of the body human and subjective formation through technical apparatuses that compose our fully cyberneticized world. The *new barbarian* is an emergent body "incapable of submitting to command"; its full instantiation will entail "a body that is incapable adapting to family life, to factory discipline, to the regulations of a traditional sex life, and so forth". In order to realize this vision, "we must go much further": the pervasive sense of nostalgia must be expunged, hybridity must be superseded some sort of *hyper*hybridity, and all previous modes of modes experimentation have to be propelled beyond themselves, to achieve higher heights. The New Flesh is ultimately a synthetic thing, unfolding beyond the boundaries of real and artificial.

While the future-oriented vision here still might be far off (but hopefully not too far!), nearly two decades have passed since Hardt and Negri have penned these words, and the conditions they depicted have accelerated into new, unpredictable formations. The impulse for those on the left is to measure such transformations in terms of their liberatory potential, a deeply problematic practice that leads far too many to miss the forest for the trees – that is, to lose scope of the "anthropological exodus" (Hardt and Negri's term) that has occurred by subordinating it instantly to value judgments. Junk these value judgments, and the nature of the new barbarian comes into close-up: it is the swirling chaos of our time, hooked together through the information superhighway, strange and often horrifying lines of flight that cut across political, social, cultural and economic strata whilst going beyond them, all diverging from one another as much as connecting.

In A Conceptual Preliminary to Understanding Meme Warfare, Vince Garton approaches this composition of forces by arguing that, at present, the effects of the internet upon politics are woefully misunderstood. For example, take the narrative that the alt-right, a subculture and political force that emerged from the shadowzones of message boards and chans, were the primary culprits behind the election of Donald Trump. This myth became so widespread that even the alt-right themselves believed in it and sought to further their illusionary reach – an act of self-reinforcing myth-making that imploded tragically in the streets of Charlottesville. To believe in such a story is to find traditional political causality at work, where a smooth and linear feedback loop moves from the engaged body politic into the political arena proper. And yet reality has shown itself to be anything but. Linearity such as this can only now be viewed as the desperate act of searching for a recognizable pattern, a cognitive map, in an environment that has become extremely complex, alien, and *hostile* (this same lesson may, in fact, reflect upon the ongoing "Russiagate" investigation).

What is at work here, Garton suggests, is the emergence proper of something analogous to Hardt and Negri's cybernetic barbarians: a *machinic subjectivity* that can only be regarded as foreign to the world that preceded it, and which puts into play an unpredictable and chaotic *cyberpolitics* (of which the recent news concerning Cambridge Analytica can only constitute a part, albeit a very important one). He continues:

If 2016 was the dawn of cyberpolitics, it is strictly because of Trump, whose victory represented perhaps the first self-conscious loss by the constellated forces of global liberalism to a memetic artefact… Trump himself is by no means conscious, let alone supportive, of this cyberian futurism in his policy objectives. His campaign drew on cyberpolitics only as much as it depended necessarily on numerous other more retrograde forms of political organisation. The quantitative units of his victory were not 4chan and Facebook and Reddit, but Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Florida… But neither focus of analysis is precisely wrong. The Trump campaign participated in and learned its tactics from the Internet with an attentiveness that allowed it to explode beyond the expectations of its opponents… Trump is both the culmination and a mockery of the politics of the liberal-securocratic world order, both subject and unwitting object, drawing on the ressentiment and revisionist aspirations of the very worldly malcontents of liberal globalisation while also representing the triumphant humiliation of the planetary order by an alien subjectivity far beyond conventional moral-political economy.

"Very worldly malcontents of liberal globalisation" could very easily apply to Hardt and Negri's own anticipations of a monstrous revolutionary chaosmos: the Thing that occurs when atomization (that is, the *dis*-integration of the postwar world order) makes an arching collision with higher and higher rates of interconnectivity. Everybody is bowling alone, but the chattering between and beneath it all turns into a cyclonic roar. To step backwards and to attempt to orientate particulars swarm towards traditional political coordinates – rallies, petition, organization, office, etc – is to try and shoehorn it into frameworks that are being rapidly obsoleted.

This is the maneuver that Hardt and Negri ultimately make, confirming Tiqqun's only slightly hyperbolic insistence that their work composed the 'idealistic face' of the Empire that they opposed. The multitude comes together and pushes the logic of neoliberal capitalism, replete with globalized liberal democracy, through itself to the other side where it implodes. What is left is the teeming constituent power of the world's peoples, united in creativity and unbridled movement alongside a modular bureaucracy that will facilitate this utopic world. In some respects, Hardt and Negri's vision looks somewhat like the ideal face of the European Union

(it's not surprising, then, to consider how many of the post-Autonomists became fervent Eurozone supporters).

Against Tiqqun's assessment, however, is another side of their work which seems to veer in another direction, and it is precisely on the question of the barbarian where this finds its most intense expression. It is, after all, difficult to square the rejection of "normalized bodies and normalized lives" with anything approaching business-as-usual politics, or even the anticipated progressive managerialism of those politics. This is the logic of *exodus* at work. The traditional political world, which encompasses the range from Putnam's American community-based civic associations to the metastate structures of the EU, unfolds through the collision of forces, each stamped with a unique-yet-unifying higher-order identity, in a way that they achieve power (or not) while being bent in a particular direction overall – or, to put it more simply, they begin as disparate elements that are arranged neatly into a grid-like system. Exodus, however, follows a different path: that of the *diagonal* that slips off the grid and evades capture by the lines. Hardt and Negri bring exodus together with the similar concepts of *desertion* and *nomadism* to express a vision of resistance that based not on the addition of political variables (stretching the liberal system into infinite representation of any and all interest and subject groups), but on *subtraction*.

While exodus for Hardt and Negri ultimately builds upwards into the liberation of collective labor (think less industrial labor, more the imperceptible labor that is immanent throughout advanced cybernetic capitalism), subtractive logic is also one that moves in the torrents of atomization, insofar as atomization is construed as the 'dropping out' from political and civic – or, ultimately, public – life. Contra those who might bemoan this as a regressive, unconstructive maneuver, exodus can be thought of playing a double role: not just subtraction from the dominant system, but elimination of *middle men*. Hardt and Negri honed-in on labor force mobility, the bodily 'anthropological exodus', and the sorts of escape paths forged by groups such as the Italian Autonomists to articulate what a politics of desertion would look like; today, this must be expanded to encompass the realm of *cypherpolitics* – political tactics and means of conducting business invisibly, without interference. Such an *exodus–into–depth* can be carried out without ever actually leaving one's primary territory – all it requires is a bit of easily obtained know-how and access to cryptocurrenices.

Cypherpolitics is already quite close to the anthropological exodus, and while it is beyond the scope here a conceptual genealogy of each would likely plummet quickly backwards to identical source materials. It is also partially operationalized within the emergent machinic subjectivity that is tearing the political asunder: start following conversations about blockchain technology and see where you end up. We are propelled beyond politics, because the core of exodus is *anti-political*. For this reason, many on the left seem to inherently view the emergent machinic subjectivity with an absolute sense of suspicion, if not outright revile. If this fundamental process is about scaling down, routing-around, and escaping from, mass left movements have characterized themselves as advocating a scaling-up to the order of grand, centralized politics. It, in other words, operates antithetically to the concept of *exodus* itself. The implication is that in time the left will, along with the mainstream right, become irrelevant.

Consider the following: beginning in 1994, the Zapatista National Liberation Army (ELZN) staged an insurgency in Chiapas, Mexico. Lasting two years, the struggle evolved into what the RAND Corporation described as a "social netwar", an information age-mode of conflict that tendstowards network organization, spills over national borders, and produces hybridized alliances between elements whose conjunction would have been unlikely or impossible in an earlier era. Both the ELZN and their transnational allies – which ranged from NGOs to hackers and other sorts of cyberspace actors (for an excellent account of the role of the Electronic Disturbance Theater, see this interview with Ricardo Dominguez; pdf warning) – undoubtedly composed an early iteration of what Garton called "worldly malcontents of liberal globalisation" (the Zapatistas did, after all, help popularize the term 'neoliberalism' as a term for the new, abstract enemy of the post-Cold War era of globalization). Like Hardt and Negri's cyborgian barbarians, the overall movement scrambled strict binaries and produced an idiosyncratic decoding of time: an indigenous movement, opposing neoliberal integration while borrowing freely from the infrastructure of that world, weaving together an exodus with the aid of cutting-edge cyberculture.

The forces that accelerated the ELZN insurgency haunt the world again today, but in many spaces the left seems recalcitrant to engage with it. The hyperskepticism towards cypherpolitical tools, leads to an indifference to them that will, in time, reinforce patterns of obsolescence – and it can also lead to a call for regulatory behavior, which will only *amplify* the demands for these tools. Likewise, the more 'traditionally' political, though marginal, rejection of metastate structures and embrace of secessionist ethos is shunned, be it attempts to escape the dictates of the EU, or the moves by states in the US to extricate themselves from federal government. In each case the left positions itself as the pragmatic actor, the reinforcer of the status quo to which it is ostensibly opposed. Why it should carry that burden is unclear.

Perhaps instead of reading Hardt and Negri as Tiqqun do, in which the age after Empire – their concept for the postwar order of liberal capitalist democracy attached to the project of globalization – is characterized by the culmination of the Empire drive, but exodus pursued to its most extreme lengths. This would mark the deeper and deeper penetration of connectivity, but the exact opposite movement in terms of political integration and conditional lock-in. Instead of a higher order entity, the scaling-down of power, in direct alignment with the inescapable drift of techno-economic developing. The collective labor of the multitude: cascading divergence.

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In immediately related extended blogosphere happenings: Axxon Horror gives a rundown on "connective disintegration" – the exit diagonal of *high connectivity, low integration*; Chris Shaw critiques nationalism populism and looks towards an emergent "networked tribalism" that rejects universalism for a "particularism… beyond spatiality"; and Xenogoth talks about the ELZN in relation to his ongoing exploration of patchwork. Also: Justin Murphy gets stoned and explores capitalist value criteria, relativism & ethics, while J Crane continues to draw out the revolutionary war machine burning in the interstices of Deleuze, Spinoza and George Jackson.

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